GAMES: Virtual Worlds and Reality

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The development of a frame-game designed for organizational change management processes

Cătălina Ciuce, Elyssebeth Leigh, Hidehiko Kanegae

Abstract

This article describes the attempt to create a frame game that would help participants (organizational members) to understand the benefits of taking on a participatory approach in organizational change management processes. The simulation has three main phases. Throughout the steps employees and management have to work separately at first, and collaborate later on in order to obtain a shared vision of the change process. Being part of the planning and the implementation stages of change, employees get to reduce their resistance and have an overall better image of the process, which in turn provides a more efficient management of the situation. The article is going to present design related considerations, and the implications this gaming simulation might have for organizational members, researchers and consultants faced with a change process.

Keywords: organizational change; participatory approach; gaming simulations.

Introduction

Organizational change is one of the most important challenges organizational researchers and consultants have to deal with. This is partly because of the great diversity within change processes from one organization to another, because of their length and the general lack of immediate results. Although changes vary widely, there still are a few general aspects of great importance that can be addressed in order to improve the whole management of the change situation. One of the key issues is the impact that such a process has on employees. Resistance to change is one of the first outcomes, while also being one of the main concerns consultants have to deal with.

The participatory approach on organizational change

'It is true that an experience is by definition unique to each individual and that the sense of epiphany is mental' (Corbeil, 2003, p. 166). Any important change process becomes a personal experience for an employee. This is one of the main reasons why people tend to react to change and why at first very few people embrace it, while most employees manifest resistance. Usually in real life companies' change processes are designed and planned by management and organizational consultants and employees are at best involved in the implementation stage of the process. This is the "expert approach" to organizational change (Kasteren & Peters, n.d.). The participatory approach combines organization oriented change (focused on diagnosis, goal setting, design of the change process and implementation) with a person oriented change. The participatory approach allows organizational members to be part of the diagnosis stage in order to obtain problem awareness, in goal setting for creating a shared vision of the future and in the design of the change process to help them make the transition to the new organization more easily. Ultimately organizational members are involved in the implementation stage of the change process where the embedding of the new knowledge, skills and attitudes takes place.

Being involved in all these steps allows employees to have a better understanding of the change process, an increased awareness of it (Rafferty & Griffin, 2001), and to influence it so that their needs are better taken into consideration. All in all, involvement offers a sense of recognition, responsibility and achievement that are essential motivating factors (Hertzberg, 1968, in Cameron & Green, 2004) and driving forces in change commitment formation and overcoming resistance (Johnson & Fredian, 1986).

The use of gaming simulation in change processes

Kasteren and Peters (n.d.) present the role and usefulness of gaming simulations in the implementation of change when using an expert approach and in all other stages (except for

evaluation) if taking on a participatory approach of the organizational change process. Tsuchiya (1998) argues the impact of simulations in increasing the commensurability of interpretative frameworks which is essential to business reengineering because it provides the central direction indispensable to any change process. Through simulations organizational knowledge formation is enabled (Tsuchiya, 1998). Ruohomaki (2003) used a simulation game to analyze the present state of work processes in an organization and to test new operational models before implementing them. Yang, Leliaert, Zhao, Angehrn and van Geffen (n.d.) used a computer based simulation to help managers understand the main causes of resistance to change and identify the optimal tactics to reduce it.

In their overview of the studies on the use of simulation and gaming in organizational change processes Joldersma and Geurts (1998) identify two main categories of objectives: individual and collective learning. In individual oriented learning simulations have been used to explain actors' mental models, to change actors' mental models (Scherpereel, 2005) and to gain organizational members' support for change. Also at individual level simulation were successfully used in attitude change interventions (Bredemeier, Berstein & Oxman, 1982). In collective oriented learning interventions using simulations were focused on facilitating exchange of organizational members' perceptions, inducing awareness, facilitating interactions or training participants to deal with a new situation (Joldersma & Geurts, 1998).

Considerations for the design of the frame-game

The purpose of this frame game is to offer organizations that experience a change process a helpful tool for monitoring it and overcoming resistance. Lack of information and a poor understanding of the change process produce fear and anxiety towards the change process which, in turn, may create passive or active forms of resistance. Simulations and gaming have been effectively used to construct a shared vision of the change process and help managers better communicate the change. The problem is that an organization, when changing, often goes through an iterative process where the initial plan is altered more than just once and where different courses of action have to be tested before implemented. In this case the initial shared vision may prove unhelpful later on in the process and may even hinder it. If organizational members have overcome their initial resistance, a series of unsuccessful changes during this testing phase could lower even more their newly formed commitment and resistance will generate new problems.

The intervention tool we present is therefore not aimed at creating a shared initial vision of change (even though such a vision might be broadly shaped during the gaming simulation) but at teaching organizational members the benefits of tackling change from a participatory approach and teaching them to use such an approach in all organizational processes. This helps organizational members to self monitor the change process through its entire cycle and is used to prevent further resistance formation.

Considering the participatory approach we felt that an open free form game would be a better option than a closed one in order to allow participants as much interaction as possible with the game model (Klabbers, 2006; Kasteren & Peters, n.d.) especially since the simulation is designed for exploratory and development purposes (Peters & Vissers, 2004).

The rationale for constructing the different rounds in the simulation was to increase the impact on participants by having them experience both the participatory approach and the nonparticipatory approach during the same simulation exercise, within a restricted time frame. Increasing the impact was also the reason why at a certain point in the simulation organizational members have to create a visual physical map of the change process. Having the change plans in a palpable format helps them better understand the impact any decision taken at a certain level of the organization has on other system components and mainly on other organizational members.

The scenario of the simulation is very broadly defined and there is no given set of rules that limit participants' actions. Throughout the simulation they are free to create their own inner group rules and to establish their own 'modus operandi'. The only constraints we established were those regarding the phases of the game and their sequence.

In terms of actors and roles, organizational members maintain their real life role, whether they are managers or employees. This helps maintain a realistic feel of the situation and favors the transfer of the knowledge and skills they obtain during the simulation back into real life and their specific organizational context (Tomikura n.d. in Joldersma & Geurts, 1998).

The flow of the gaming simulation

The gaming simulation broadly consists of three rounds throughout which employees and management of an organization have to work separately at first, and collaborate later on in order to obtain a shared vision of the change process. For the first two phases of the simulation the two types of actors (employees and managers) have the same tasks, but they do not interact, nor do they receive any input on the progress of the other group. Both management and employees are going to be divided into smaller groups in order to obtain more than just one interpretation of the change process.

For the first round the managers are instructed to create their vision of the organization and the changes they believe should be implemented. Similarly the task of the employee teams is to create their version of the changes needed for the organization considering their own perspective of the status-quo and envisioning the company they would like to work for. At the end of this round each group has to present a written report on their conclusions, strategies and plans for the future of the company.

In the second round the groups of managers exchange their reports and their task is to create an image of the organization according to the other groups' report. In doing so they can use organizational flowcharts or any other type or representation they consider fit in order to have a visual representation of the changes the other group envisioned. The employee groups go through the same process creating representations of the output they have from the first phase.

During the final round of the simulation employees and managers have to work together in a mixed group (or groups, depending on the total number of participants) and their task is to produce a shared vision of the change process for the company.

Debriefing

Considering the aim of the simulation is to help the members of a company understand the benefits of a participatory approach there are going to be independent debriefing sessions after each of the rounds and a final debriefing at the end of the simulation. All three debriefing sessions have different purposes and learning objectives.

The first debriefing session takes place separately with every group so that the output they each provide is not shared with the others at this point in the simulation. During this first session individual differences and the impact they have on the formation of a shared vision are discussed.

The second debriefing session is a plenary one. The visual maps for change created by all groups are discussed and compared. The participants are encouraged to share their experience in the first two rounds. For the first part, the debriefing will focus on how they felt when having to create a visual map starting from another groups' vision of the future, if it was an easy process or not, and what were the main problems they were faced with. The differences and similarities between group outcomes and the maps of the change process they created will be discussed. Overlapping different maps of the change process helps better identify similarities but also uncovers the main differences that may appear. Also, overlapping maps will help identify another key issue: what are the differences between the managers' vision and that of the employees. For the second part of the debriefing the focus will be on reaffirming the effects of a one sided perspective of the change process and the impact that the managers' vision has on the employees, since in real life it is usually the management of a company that shapes the change process. At the end of this session participants should understand that even within the managements' or the employees' group there are different perspectives generated by the different information they posses and that the decisions taken at higher organizational level may have undesired outcomes for middle and front level employees.

The final debriefing session (also a plenary one) concentrates on discussing the differences between single and multiple perspectives, and on comparing the participatory approach with the one sided approach where management decides regardless of the vision employees have. The benefits of a participatory approach are discussed but also the difficulties it raises. The conclusions obtained during prior debriefing sessions are revisited. The overall evolution of the simulation is analyzed and the focus is on identifying means to implement a participatory approach and ways to prevent problems from appearing during its implementation. In this final debriefing session input on the overall improvement of the frame game should also be gathered.

Conclusions and further considerations

The learning objective of this simulation is to help organizational members understand the benefits of using a participatory approach when planning change but also to teach them how to use such an approach and what it implies. Our main concern while designing the simulation was to create a frame flexible enough to be easily adapted to different organizations and different change processes, but also to facilitate the transfer of what they learn during the gaming simulation back into their real life and organizational context. Although this type of simulation could prove to be useful, further testing of the frame game we designed is still needed in order to better understand its impact on organizational members faced with a major change process.

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